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Surging Into the Inhuman

> *I have always unconsciously sought out that which will beat me down to the ground, but the floor is also a wall.*
>
> – Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, 1992

The attraction for me is remote: letting go of all craft and judgment, all reason and restraint, casting aside the distinctly human, in order to ride the primal forces surging up through the organism. For Land there's no liberation here other than the liberation of the zero, of death. Going posthuman doesn't mean achieving some sort of superhuman freedom and power: it's posthumanity in the rawest sense of death and extinction. Humanity is a blight on the planet and an excruciating burden on the individual: the sooner it's gotten rid of the better. Worldwide warfare might be the ultimate solution if it could shake itself loose from controlled rational discipline and just let it rip. For Land only an orgy of slaughter will do.

Presumably people who assert this sort of "virulent nihilism" never gain access to the levers of destruction, and one wonders whether they're having too much fun talking about self-immolation actually to plunge in the knife. Surely there's a puerile rhetorical thrill in writing and reading about the horror

and the mayhem, the psychosis and the putrefaction, the collapse. Maybe Land's book should be admired strictly as a worthy exemplar of a particular genre of philosophical writing instead of being given serious consideration as a way of living — or of dying.

If someone came to my practice wanting to "get different" in this particular way, would I help him? Would I encourage my client to cultivate full commitment to this particular form of extreme difference? Or would I try to dissuade and distract him? Again, maybe if I could reduce this posthuman impulse to an intellectual exercise, maybe even a personal lifestyle experiment: nothing serious, nothing he won't grow out of eventually. Ride it hard, get some mileage out of it, have some fun, write a book about it while the energy lasts. After the surge exhausts itself maybe we can move on to something else…

24 Comments

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NB

27 July 2009 at 8:36 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11537>

Christ. The book sounds awful, as in crap.

"Surely there's a puerile rhetorical thrill in writing and reading about the horror and the mayhem, the psychosis and the putrefaction, the collapse."

Oh yeah, you bet. Not only are we pornographically drawn to the ugly end from the safety of our armchairs (emphasis on the safety) but – to be the bringer of such fantasies: ahhhh, heaven.

And quite a lot of it is pretty good too: Story of the Eye; some of Burroughs' stories like 'Apocalypse'; passages of Bely's Petersburg; the Revelation of St John; er, The End by The Doors. But some of it is just purely and simply awful – and possibly more accurately portrays the end of the world simply because it's so bad.

If Land's book is as you say then it's an example of the distinctly still-human desperation for control over one's life, over life. How better to control the flux, the disappointments, the brutishness, the powerlessness, the incomprehension, than to deny it all? Thanatos, isn't it?

I knew it all the time: Posthuman just means dead.

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john doyle < http://ecliptics.wordpress.com/>

27 July 2009 at 9:39 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11543>

It's well written, full of fire and attitude and rhetorical flare — I suspect the author would cite Nietzsche rather than Bataille as his stylistic and theoretical mentor. I enjoyed reading it — got all the way to the end without skipping huge chunks or getting bored. But a work like this needs to be evaluated not just on the grounds of aesthetics but also in terms of truth and justice. For me, exercising my distinctly human judgment, the book fails on these grounds.

The End by the Doors? Did I ever mention, NB, that I saw the Doors twice in concert? I'm always entertained when I hear a Doors oldie on the radio, but I never play the old LPs any more.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11543&_wpnonce=fb64b9de2c>
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NB

27 July 2009 at 10:25 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11547>

Well, I think I told you that I've read one article by Land that he wrote years ago and I thought it was pretty good, especially in terms of being "well written" in that Nietzschean way. Some maybe his book passes muster in the same way as the other apocalyptic tracts I mentioned! But, I agree with you about truth and justice.

Right, I'm going to throw any credibility out of the window now… I still like The Doors quite a lot. I got into them when I was about 12 and thought they were great. By the end of my adolescence I thought they were pretty bad, pretty much a joke. Then, I started listening to them again in my mid-20s. And I just started enjoying the music, enjoying Morrison's frequently silly lyrics. And I realised that I really did like them. They're the last word in phallic rock, you might say, and they do it well. Certainly by the end, Morrison realised the (no doubt unintentional) comedy in The End. I'm particularly fond of The Soft Parade album, where they're clearly parading themselves – and having fun with it. They mean it, man. They also sound like no one else, despite sounding very much of their time. And I would have definitely gone to see them live.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11547&_wpnonce=b87b6abead>
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john doyle < http://ecliptics.wordpress.com/>

27 July 2009 at 2:33 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11556>

“When I was back there in seminary school…” I’m glad to hear about your Doors enthusiasm, NB. I didn’t mention that I don’t listen to the records anymore because I sold all my vinyl and turntable when we moved to France. On our last trip to Paris we took a little soft parade of our own past the place where Jim Morrison died — didn’t visit the grave though. A lot of French rock aficionados like the Doors too, and expressed l’envie forte when I told them I’d seen the Doors play live. I probably listened to the Waiting for the Sun album more often than any of the others.

★**< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11556&_wpnonce=5c24f876d9>**
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John Hannon

20 August 2009 at 1:13 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11802>

I used to know Nick Land before he went off to live in China, and would say that he was one of the most intellectually charismatic and intriguing characters I’ve ever met. (Up there with Terence Mckenna)
His work following “The Thirst for Annihilation” was a delirious sp(l)icing of Deleuze & Guattari with virology and cyberpunk sci-fi, which he was able to get away with largely by being such a brilliant prose stylist – although eventually he became interested in esoteric number theory (describing himself as a “freelance technosatanist trying to relearn how to count”) and his writings became utterly impenetrable.
However, for those few years in the 90s when he was the star attraction at Warwick University’s annual “Virtual Futures” conferences, he made philosophy more exciting and fun than it’s ever been before or since.

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john doyle < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/>

20 August 2009 at 7:36 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11804>

I agree about Land's prose: keen and attention-grabbing. Odd that he got into number theory, since he expressly states in The Thirst that he's not much at maths. No doubt a charismatic figures with an attraction to apocalyptic nihilism can keep a place hopping.

I'm aware of Nick Land as a sort of legendary figure from the blogosphere's deep past (i.e., early 200s), before I started reading and writing and commenting on them. Apparently his Hyperstition site was a big point of convergence for a number of theory bloggists, with k-punk being in effect a protege of Land's. The CCRU was another legendary occupant of blogspace involving some of these people. Did you run in these circles, John?

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11804&_wpnonce=93512409d9>
Like

John Hannon

21 August 2009 at 9:35 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11805>

Yes, although I've never studied at university (being merely a philosophical hobbyist), I attended all the Virtual Futures conferences and also various Ccru related events such as the 1999 SYZYGY hyperstition happening which they produced in collaboration with the digital arts collective Orphan Drift.

Being so very much of its time in its intimate connection with 90s pre-millennial cyber-rave/drug culture, Land's post-Annihilation work can admittedly seem somewhat dated now, but – for me at least – it once really did feel like the future.

For a good account of Land's presentation of his apocalyptic "Meltdown" paper at the 1994 Virtual Futures conference and the discussions provoked in its aftermath, see the "Rhizomatics of Cyberspace" chapter in Charles Stivale's book "The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari." (It can also be found on the net somewhere or other)

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Carl < http://carldyke.wordpress.com/>

22 August 2009 at 4:56 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11806>

"Again, maybe if I could reduce this posthuman impulse to an intellectual exercise, maybe even a personal lifestyle experiment: nothing serious, nothing he won't grow out of eventually. Ride it hard, get some mileage out of it, have some fun, write a book about it while the energy lasts."

Nice.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11806&_wpnonce=db66580c41>

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john doyle < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/>

22 August 2009 at 7:54 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11808>

Here's a bit from Stivale's book referenced by John Harron:

"David Porush continued in the preceding vein: he said that Land unleashed a lot of pleasure in his "meltdown," self-marginalizing subversive text, but also apocalypse: that the text urges and embraces the apocalypse at the same time as warning against it. Porush said that such pleasure might turn quickly to other things, and that there is something irresponsible in unleashing this apocalyptic view as a form of pleasure. Land said he had a lack of sympathy with responsibility as a concept, that it constitutes a crushing form of stratification. He asked, further, at the end of the day, does being responsible really put you on the side of the angels? We're so sedimented with years of responsibility, but this is merely a way to hang onto a sense of control, which itself is a part of the problem, not part of the solution."

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Like

Marcus Welsh

23 August 2009 at 3:52 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11811>

It's ironic, but not unexpected given his gloriously contradictory attitude to the question of praxis, that Land should go on to change his characterization of the "Apocalypse" (i.e. the techno-capitalist singularity) from a quasi-metaphysical fatum that humanity can neither prevent nor effectively forestall (as in "Meltdown" and other papers and lectures from around that time) to a sacred politicomilitary task to be prosecuted in the face of potentially fatal opposition from a resurgent Islam and European leftists!

> he made philosophy more exciting and fun than it's ever been before or since.

To philosophy students who'd far rather be doing something other than philosophy, yes.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11811&_wpnonce=18310dedea>
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john doyle < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/>

23 August 2009 at 8:39 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11814>

So did Land become a neocon? A hyperstitionist who expands the fiction of an American century until it fills the world? Or is he Chinese neocon now?

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Like

Marcus Welsh

24 August 2009 at 2:03 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11817>

> So did Land become a neocon?

Yes, and a rabid one at that, sucking up to at least one prominent neocon, enthusing over racist crap about “Eurabia” (albeit with a twist: he’s been known to aver the racial superiority of Han asians!).

> A hyperstitionist who expands the fiction of an American century until it fills the world?

On one occasion he stated that there was no (one supposes, “machinic”) inconsistency involved in the coexistence of, on the one hand, a militarily adventurous United States, and on the other China as a politically repressive economic powerhouse.

Whether you consider any of that “intellectually charismatic” would obviously be a matter for your intellectual conscience.

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Like

John Hannon

24 August 2009 at 2:35 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11818>

I blame the drugs

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11818&_wpnonce=b07534ea03>
Like

Marcus Welsh

24 August 2009 at 4:43 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11819>

Yes, huge quantities of acid and speed aren't always helpful when it comes to formulating clear and precise arguments.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11819&_wpnonce=f2c3532403>
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Carl < http://carldyke.wordpress.com/>

24 August 2009 at 7:23 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11821>

There's nothing charismatic about clarity and precision.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11821&_wpnonce=f507989e91>
Like

Marcus Welsh

25 August 2009 at 2:14 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-

inhuman/#comment-11824>

> There's nothing charismatic about clarity and precision.

I hear Bertrand Russell used it to wow all the ladies.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11824&_wpnonce=a75c42ef2c>
Like

NB

26 August 2009 at 5:48 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11831>

"> There's nothing charismatic about clarity and precision.

I hear Bertrand Russell used it to wow all the ladies."

Ah, how times have changed… Years ago "making love" meant whispering sweet nothings to your loved one in the arbour. Now it means getting fucked.

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11831&_wpnonce=b5c10e412f>
Like

David Johnson < http://www.davidjohnson.org.uk>

7 September 2009 at 9:22 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-

inhuman/#comment-11858>

John Doyle is right that bataillean ecstactic ruination is just a ride for the connesoir of such things. For one, you need something to expend in the first place, despite the myth of solar abundance, as Bataille himself knew (there is little concern for the paradoxes that haunted Bataille in Land's book, nor in a great deal of the Bataille industry). The fact that you need hard assets – the gold standard of pleasure – in order to be soveriegn, rather than a mere attitude of reality defiance, is the true 'inhuman'. I have been attacking the ecstacy ruin equation since 2001, with 'The Time of the Lords: An Attack on Bataille's Slave Aesthetic of Transience', and 'The Myth of Transience'(2005). Not a attack on Land alone, although he largely 'inspired me': he was my lecturer at Warwick when I was there in 90-91. His book largely de-politicises and de-problematises Bataillean expenditure; he says in essence 'Bataille's extreme, but I'm worse'. He was certainly charismatic, I have no problem there…

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11858&_wpnonce=9e34dbfb36>
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tony

7 September 2009 at 10:07 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11859>

'he fact that you need hard assets – the gold standard of pleasure – in order to be soveriegn, rather than a mere attitude of reality defiance,'

That's on the money all right. But the "attitude of reality defiance" is impressive in its own right, because it is self-propelling, but always turns in on itself. The desire to find only the 'non-boring' becomes boring. It does try to totalize, and that's the attraction, this malignant force, but you lose interest in it when the epistolary-documented attraction to snakes, etc., becomes a little more than purely social.

And this: ‘Land said he had a lack of sympathy with responsibility as a concept,’

That hasn’t changed, given that he’s hardly inaccessible, to say the least. Only last week he threatened to be unable to provide me with a ‘torrent of logoglyphic wonders’ due to hecticism (my word this time (lol). But do look at the old Hyperstition site, I’m sure he’d love you to email him, it’s an ‘urbanatomy’ mail he’s got under his Shanghai guide. I’ve always been crazy about him, he’s one of the cutest people in the world, but too devoted to ‘proud psychosis’ for my taste ultimately, and the eclipse of official neocon power seems to have made him revert to Working Class Hero mode. Not unlike other sea changes done when the Gold Standard called, I imagine.

‘I’m aware of Nick Land as a sort of legendary figure from the blogosphere’s deep past (i.e., early 200s), before I started reading and writing and commenting on them.’

Yes, he’s working some new gigs now, but don’t expect to find them in the old places, and I don’t think it’s the BlackGlama ads, i.e., ‘What Becomes a Legend Most?’ Not that I don’t think he’d do one.

‘said that such pleasure might turn quickly to other things, and that there is something irresponsible in unleashing this apocalyptic view as a form of pleasure.’

If that isn’t the truth, and it quickly turns into pain as Land doesn’t bother with that ‘gold standard of pleasure’ for himself. He likes to be talked about, you can be sure of that. I can’t imagine he has enjoyed any thread more than this one. But DO email him, I’m sure you’d get results. All you have to do is tell him what a great writer he is, and he’s yours (unfortunately, lol) for life.

★**< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11859&_wpnonce=fdf8bb927e>**
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The Land Girls

8 September 2009 at 4:37 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11863>

So who's his designated Useful Idiot this time around, Tony?

★< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=11863&_wpnonce=d096428283>
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tony

8 September 2009 at 8:30 am < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-11866>

John–typically, I got stuck in the comments and hadn't seen when you first posted this. I've only read excerpts of this book, it's frankly weirdly melodramatic in tone–'good of kind', as used to be said in Parents' Magazine, but the writer himself went on to a thoroughly 'respectable' lifestyle, married with children, etc.–so I assume he took your therapeutic advice before you formulated it. His most recent Magnum Opus, a guide to Shanghai, contains a pun or two, otherwise his wife writes the shopping news, he did some of the history, I believe. I had thought there might have been 'huge quantities of acid and speed', because there's that colleague who wrote 'Writing on Drugs'. I've read that she's the more user-friandly of that early duo.

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noir-realism < http://darkecologies.com>

13 February 2014 at 1:29 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-21338>

What's weird in your comments and most of the comments above is that I wonder how deeply they actually read Land's book? Land's work although in the tradition of Nietzsche and Bataille was also a veritable critique of the whole Kantian internalization of philosophy into its fictional constructivism. One finds that against such irrationalism as portrayed above in comments, that Land himself and his 'virulent nihilism' was very much in the tradition of radical enlightenment philosophe's in the sense that La Gaya Science of Nietzsche was a reactionary war cry against the decadence of Wagner and the Romantics. Land even today is a traditionalist, even as he was then and was actually a reactionary against the Kantian turn which led ultimately to the dark contours of a fascist mentality: the extremes of reason become illogical and objectivity turns inhuman.

I'm going to do a post on this, but will share what he terms on page 168 as the central issue of western philosophy up to the time of Kant who he sees as the culmination of the epistemological tradition: "the question that remains repressed in the history of Western Philosophy up to Kant is not that of the articulation between subject and object, but that of the difference between the subject/object distinction itself (knowing) and inarticulate or non-objective materiality (unknowing)." He then pursues this problem through a series of diagnosis.

Land was not and is not some mindless rabid irrational creature; or, as some try even now to name him "the mad deleuzian". In fact he never once mentions Deleuze in this book, which for a thorough scholar would have been a mark against him. One sees him deal with certain concepts such as difference but from another angel than Deleuze. I'm not sure who first coined that epithet and placed it on Land but it is erroneous…. even if I disagree with Land's politics (his neo-reactionary stance in traditionalism), I too question the progressive tradition… and, even though I'm more of a ultra-leftist I still get perturbed at the unreasoning reasoning of people that make shallow assumptions of a philosophers work without truly digging down into the base

threads of the system itself. Where I see Land as deeply committed to the philosophical traditions, others seem to see him as some rabid monster or irrationalism situated outside the gates barking like Diogenes. I may have my disagreements with his notions but I do at least try to tease out what he was actually doing. Commentary for me is a duplicitous mode of doubling the work of philosopher which is already an incestuous affair as Deleuze himself once mention in relation to his histories of philosophy.

★**< https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/?like_comment=21338&_wpnonce=f4bd04cd0e>**
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noir-realism < http://darkecologies.com>

13 February 2014 at 2:23 pm < https://ktismatics.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/surging-into-the-inhuman/#comment-21341>

Addendum: The major point I'm trying to make is that many confuse Land for promoting or espousing Virulent Nihilism when in fact his critique of Kantianism and its traditions actually leads to this form of nihilism (i.e., this is his Critique of Kant and those that followed in his wake.). As he says over and over our investment in finitude is the problem, not the solution: we are the virulent nihilists who seem to wallow in the morbidities of the heat death of the universe and our trivial lives within it. Whereas for Land as for his reading of Bataille, death has no sting, its all a matter of "scales" of "strata" of layers in our ontological capacity to know. "Being would be other to death – either annihilated by it or left immaculate – were there not scales".

"What could be more pitiful than the romantics with their sobs of aspiration?" Land asks. In his logic:

Humanism: capitalism and patriarchy is the same thing as our prison. Personalism: is a trap because to believe that some of what one was holding onto will be taken care of by another being is irreligion.

What lies beyond humanism and personalism, the traps of capitalism bound to the theological ‘first cause’ (i.e., God), or the hope that we will be saved from ourselves? Something else… yet, to be defined. This was Land’s book against the contemporary cesspool of both Continental and Analytic philosophy…

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